

Tactical Errors: Union And Confederate Armies Were Hampered By Atlanta's Landscape

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Review

TACTICAL ERRORS

Union and Confederate armies were hampered by Atlanta's landscape

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McMurry, Richard M. *Atlanta 1864: Last Chance for the Confederacy*. University of Nebraska Press, 2000-08-01. ISBN 803232128

In **Atlanta 1864**, Richard McMurry ably retraces the familiar scholarly analysis of Confederate command interplay during the Atlanta campaign, in which wartime field tent strategies collided with the long distance meddling of Richmond. Disappointingly, nothing fresh and new rises from McMurry's effort.

In the author's account of the depressing and petty quarrelling among Confederate generals and leaders during Atlanta's defense - a saga that features Joseph E. Johnston, John Bell Hood, William J. Hardee, Braxton Bragg, and Jefferson Davis - Johnston takes the biggest "hit." He earns much of the criticism he gets, especially when his style of leadership is compared against the tactical daring of Lee in Virginia. McMurry does his usual scholarly work in this regard and his case is strong.

Where **Atlanta 1864** suffers most is McMurry's failure to appreciate how command decisions were influenced by topography, undergrowth, other natural landscape features (rivers and small streams), incomplete or incorrect information, and extremely poor roads along the 100-mile route of the Atlanta campaign. For example, much is made of the discovery of the undefended Snake Creek Gap and the opportunity it seemed to offer the Federals to trap the Confederate army in Dalton on May 9.

Instead, the author should have made more of the missed Federal opportunity at Resaca on May 14 and 15 - which represented a chance to annihilate the Confederate army, trapped as it was with rivers at its rear and flank. Snake Creek Gap was the *gate* to the annihilation of the Confederate army, but Resaca, eight miles east on the Western and Atlantic Railroad (and 13

miles south of Dalton), was the greater opportunity. And it was William Sherman, not James McPherson, who muddled this at Resaca.

Had George Thomas's and McPherson's armies, with their right flanks protected by the Oostenaula River, been ordered by Sherman to assault Leonidas Polk's and Hardee's fronts, the Confederates would almost have certainly been overwhelmed in position or destroyed in retreat crossing the rivers. Later in the campaign, Sherman repeated this tactical blunder when his reluctance to "go for the jugular" caused him to disregard Thomas's offer to use the Fourth and Fourteenth Corps of his Army of the Cumberland to assault and most probably destroy a majority of the rebel army at Jonesboro on September 1.

Disregard for critical topography and general conditions limiting troop movement again clouds the author's judgment when, on page 88, McMurry writes that Johnston could "have hurried west from Allatoona and confronted Sherman while the Federals were on low ground along the left (south) bank of the Etowah River." He adds that a United States army "staff ride" concluded a century and a half later that this would have been the best opportunity in the entire campaign for Johnston to have "fought with advantage."

The expertise of the army staff riders notwithstanding, given the condition of the existing roads in 1864 along the south bank of the Etowah River from Allatoona to Sherman's river crossing point near Kingston, a scheme to move an entire army and its equipment such distance in a timely manner would have been impossible. The only decent road west from Allatoona was the route Johnston actually used (the direct road from Acworth to Dallas), and it was along this road in the thickets and maze of ravines from Pickett's Mill through New Hope to Dallas that the next battles took place.

Overall, **Atlanta 1864: Last Chance for the Confederacy** is a well-written and well-researched study of the interplay of military/civilian bungling. Richard McMurry's analysis of command decisions in the field is less convincing. However, four chapters in the appendix are especially useful and concise: "Chickamauga Fever and Grant's Grand Strategy for 1864"; "Numbers and Losses"; "Johnston's Railroad Strategy"; and "The Atlanta Campaign and the Election of 1864."

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work-in-progress is entitled Tracing General Sherman's Route from Ringgold to Jonesboro.